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ABSTRACT

Arab Americans share a culture which places religious beliefs firmly at the core of all aspects of life. A brief description of what an Arab is and the historical background of the Arab world are provided. This background is placed in context of Arabs' immigration to the United States and the views of the West by Arabs and of Arabs by Westerners. The article also describes Arab values, beliefs, and customs including the relationship of church and state, the patriarchal family structure, the role of women, and spouse selection and marital relations. Counselors working with Arab Americans benefit from an awareness of these cultural beliefs. A competent counselor could never ignore the influence of the Islamic religion in the life of an Arab. Furthermore, Western counselors must certainly be aware of the influence of family and the roles men and women are expected to play in society. Counselors also benefit from an awareness of the certain cultural differences that may stand in the way of open communication. For example, Arab Americans should be given the opportunity to meet with a same-sex counselor. (Contains 18 references.) (JE)

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Running head: ARAB AMERICANS

The Cultural Heritage of Arab Americans and Implications for Counseling

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Abstract

Arab Americans share a culture which places religious beliefs firmly at the core of all aspects of life. The history of Arab Americans, their views of the West, and the West's perception of them are all discussed. Knowledge of the Arab culture is essential for counselors working with Arab American clients, and possible implications of the Arab culture in the counseling session are reviewed.

The Cultural Heritage of Arab Americans and Implications for Counseling

Arab Americans have been one of the least "meltable" of all immigrant groups who have come to the United States. As a people, they share a strong religious and cultural history which continues to guide them in their everyday interactions. Yet theirs is a culture and religion little understood by the West. To most Americans, the Arabs remain a mysterious segment of the U.S. population.

This article will review the major aspects of that culture, including the significance of historical contact with the West. Arab customs and beliefs are outlined, and the implications for counselors of Arab American clients will be discussed.

The Geographical and Indigenous Makeup of the Arab World

Describing someone as Arab-American does little to pinpoint the actual nation of ancestry. The Arab world constitutes the core area of the Middle East, and is divided geographically into two major parts: one of them lies in Southwest Asia, and the other in North Africa. Most authors agree that the Arab countries of Southwest Asia include Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Southern Yemen. Those in Northern Africa include Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Sudan (Patai, 1983). Others also include Kuwait, Mauritania, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates (Findlay, 1994). Findlay suggests that there is confusion among writers as to what constitutes an Arab state because the national boundaries were mostly imposed on the Arabs by Western powers over the last 100 years with little regard for divisions along ethnic and religious lines. Therefore, national

boundaries are often meaningless in identifying "Arab" from "non-Arab" nations.

Mere residence in any of these countries is not sufficient for an individual to be considered an Arab. Nor are the Arabic people considered to be of one common racial heritage (Tuma, 1987). As to the question of then what constitutes an Arab, there is no clear definition that is readily agreed upon by both Arab and Western scholars. There is some consensus that to be considered an Arab, an individual must meet at least one of the following criteria: speak Arabic, be brought up in an Arab culture, live in an Arab country, believe in Muhammad's teaching, cherish the memory of the Arab Empire, and/or be a member of any of the Arab nations (Patai, 1983). To overcome the difficulties of finding consensus, Jabra I. Jabra, an Arab poet, wrote an Arab is "anyone who speaks Arabic as his own language and consequently feels as an Arab" (Adams, 1971, p. 11).

The Historical Background of the Arab World

A Muslim university professor from Morocco wrote, "Historically, the Arabs were never a pure race. The only link is not, as may Europeans think, religious, but cultural" (Butt, 1988, p. 13). This culture had its peak in the "Golden Era" of Arab learning, roughly from the eighth to the twelfth century. The Arab world stretched almost to India in the east and up through Spain in the west. The expansion of the Arab Empire brought Arab scholars into contact with other cultures, and Arabic inventions such as trigonometry and algebra, as well as music, astrology, and literature, were passed into Europe (Butt, 1988).

Around the end of the twelfth century, the Arab Empire began to decline. The Christian armies expelled them from Europe, and by the sixteenth century, most of what is now considered the Arab world was under the control of the Turkish (Ottoman) Empire. The

Ottomans endorsed Islam as the dominant religion of the area, and they chose to encourage the co-existence of a variety of religious and ethnic groups, rather than attempting to assimilate them into one culture. The Arabs were not required to abdicate their traditions, religion, or cultural distinctions (Findlay, 1994). Although Arab control by the Turks was not absolute, it led to a period of Arabic cultural and religious stagnation, which was to last for the next 400 years. An Arabic writer, Nejla Izzeddin, describes this cultural stagnation as not only an influence from the outside world. She wrote:

> ...even more devastating than the visitation which came from without was the drying up of the creative and adventurous spirit within Arab society itself. The keen intellectual curiosity which characterized the preceding period, the passionate and untiring search for knowledge, and the joy of adventure were smothered under a hard crust of dogma and fundamentalism. Free thought was banished, traditionalism reigned in its place. (Patai, 1983, p. 250)

This complete acceptance of the idea of Arab stagnation, a concept which has been internalized by the Arab world and is now considered unquestionable historical fact, is the backdrop against which the modern Arabic world must be viewed (Patai, 1983).

At the end of World War I, British and French armies "liberated" the Arab world from Turkish control and began the period of European colonialism (Butt, 1988). The Europeans were determined to export natural resources from the Arab world, and they restructured not only the economy, but the distribution of the population as well. Previously concentrated in the inland capital cities, the population now moved to settlements in the coastal areas close to the main European-built ports. European control also meant that

settlers came to own the best agricultural land, leading to the impoverishment of a large portion of the rural population. In 1923, the Treaty of Lausanne gave the British and French the right to impose permanent boundaries on the territories of the Arab world. The national boundaries were drawn to reflect military or external political judgements about the partitioning of territories with little regard for the cultural makeup of the people concerned. The result was imposed national boundaries which divided former national groups, such as the Kurds, and defined political territories which included very heterogeneous populations. The one exception was the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, whose land, which was considered to be useless, non-arable desert, was not divided (Findlay, 1994). While colonial rule ended after the second world war the artificially-imposed national boundaries remained.

A second imposition on the Arab world from the European world was the creation of Israel in 1948. This idea was originally supported by the British in the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Arab historians call this "the greatest single trauma that the region has suffered...For the Arabs it represents the ultimate betrayal by the colonial powers...[and] is the greatest source of resentment and bitterness, and is seen more than anything else as being the cause of divisions among Arab countries (Butt, 1988, p. 19).

The history of the Arab world since the colonial days has been one of conflict and slow economic development. The Israeli/Palestinian conflict, at the forefront of the Arab world, has been responsible for numerous social problems throughout the region, including a large refugee population and a legacy of force and coercion. Arab nations consistently spend large portions of their national budget on defense. For example, Iraq, Syria, Oman, and United Arab Emirates all devoted more than 45% of their national budget to defense during

the 1980s (Findlay, 1994). While the Arab governments account for only 3% of the world's population, they account for more than 8% of the military spending (Lamb, 1987). The result has been diminished resources available for social programs and human development.

The European parliamentary system, the last of the impositions by the Europeans, failed for a number of reasons. First, it was superimposed on the existing Arab culture. The high degree of illiteracy, poverty, and feudalism which pervaded Arab societies made a parliamentary system unworkable. Second, the Arab world had a strong privileged class which was not willing to relinquish power. Third, the large peasant population was unaware of any of the political changes being made in the cities. Finally, the defeat of the Palestinians in 1948, was a decisive blow to Arab honor. Members of the military in many nations decided that the only solution was to remove the corrupt political regimes, which were held responsible for the disaster, and take control in a series of military coups d'etat. Today, the majority of Arab nations are headed by a centralized military government.

The History of the Arabs in the United States

Currently, there are more than 2.5 million Arab-Americans in the United States (Lamb, 1987). These individuals are immigrants and their descendants who came to the U.S. in three major immigration waves.

The first wave of Arab immigration to the United States occurred between 1878 and 1924, about two hundred years after the first Jewish immigrants. What actually encouraged the Arabs to begin their immigration is the subject of controversy. Some historians argue for economic reasons while others suggest a desire to flee sectarian or political conflict (Orfalea, 1988). One economist wrote that Arab immigration was sparked by both the imposition of

conscription by the Turkish army and widespread massacres which occurred in 1860 (Hooglund, cited in Orfalea, 1988). The Arab peasantry formed 90 percent of the first wave of immigration. Most of these immigrants remained in New York in Arab enclaves, and the majority worked in the garment industry.

From 1924 to 1947, a restrictive immigration quota was placed on the Arabs. During the entire decade of the 1920s, only 8,253 Arabs entered the U.S. (Orfalea, 1988). The end of the second world war, which coincided with the formation of Israel, was the beginning of the second wave of Arab immigration. Approximately 80,000 Arabs immigrated to America between 1947 and 1966. They were primarily Palestinian, as 750,000 Palestinians were displaced by the creation of Israel. They also constituted the "brain drain" from the newly independent Arab states. Many were dissatisfied with the military coups in their homeland, some wanted a better standard of living, and others were political exiles from the war. This wave of immigrants, from a different social class from the first wave, did not intermingle with the previous immigrants. They tended to slide more easily into American society and were less likely to express their political consciousness in the open (Orfalea, 1988).

The third and final wave of Arab immigrants took place between 1967 and 1985, during which 250,000 Arabs immigrated to the U.S. (Orfalea, 1988). Even more were professionals than in the second wave. During this wave, half of all Arab science and engineering Ph.D.s left the Arab world (Orfalea, 1988). What differentiates this wave from the others is that the immigrants were leaving primarily because their homelands were torn asunder by abysmal violence. Upon arriving in America, they continued to have a sympathetic view toward those they left behind and felt a greater drive to participate in the

new Arab American political groups (Orfalea, 1988).

The Arabs' Perception of the West

Given the history of western influence in the Arab world, it is not surprising that many Arabs consider the West as a cause of many of its problems (Findlay, 1994). They have not forgotten the "broken promises" of the West, and many Arabs perceive the West to be untrustworthy and unreliable (Almaney & Alwan, 1982). This negative view was only deepened with the West's help in the creation and promotion of the Israeli state.

Conversely, the Arabs have a strange fascination with the West. Patai (1983) likens the West to a magical genie which holds all sorts of magical tricks, but is also "unscrupulous, bestial, greedy for wealth, and an unbeliever" (p. 269). With all their pride and cultural identity, they are also willing to learn from anyone, as long as they feel the learning will benefit them. This is most notable in the form of technology. The Arabs believe they must learn from the industrialized countries in order to rid themselves of their technological domination. Western technology is a dual-edged sword: it is the instrument of Western domination that promises to one day free the Arab (Patai, 1983).

Finally, there is a faction in the Arab world which considers that the Islamic system is destined to eliminate all others in the world if Muslims only implement it properly and are united in their endeavors. Others, while they believe in Muslim unity, believe the concept of world domination is unrealistic and naive (Boullata, 1990).

The West's Images of the Arabs

Lamb (1987) writes "probably no ethnic or religious group has been so constantly and massively disparaged in the media as the Arab over the past two decades. Being Arab is a

liability everywhere but in the Arab homelands, for virtually everywhere else the Arab is stereotyped in negative terms" (p. 126). One 1992 study of American's attitudes towards Arabs found that the majority of Americans in the study agreed, at least slightly, with the statement "These days it is hard to trust Arabs" (Johnson). Arab scholars, on the other hand, have charged that Western studies and portrayals of Arabs have been "manipulative, biased toward the West, and intellectually incomplete" (Sullivan & Ismael, 1991, p. 206).

According to Almaney and Alwan (1982), there are several factors which may account for the West's negative image of the Arabs. The first is the religious conflict between Christianity and Islam. The fusion of religion and government in Islam nations remains a difficult concept for many Westerners, raised in the tradition of a secular government. A second reason is the ideological difference between many Arab countries and the West. Many in the West resented the decolonization of the Arab world and the ungrateful attitude of the Arabs. The West had introduced an educational system, transportation, communication, and had discovered oil. After decolonization, the Arab world rejected the Western style of government, preferring military dictatorships in its place. Furthermore, the Arab's support of the Communist bloc during the Cold War furthered the ideological rift between the Arabs and the West. Meanwhile, the Arabs continued to be indignant with the West's persistent military, economic, and moral support of Israel. Finally, Western communication media have played a role in creating, perpetuating, and dramatizing many of the stereotyped Arab images. From the 1920's silent movies to current blockbusters, the Arabs are portrayed either as fools, pleasure-seekers, or blood-thirsty desert killers (Patai, 1983).

It has also been politically expedient for the West to portray the Arabs as evil. The

Pan-Arabian nation, a continual theme in Arab political thought, is perceived as a threat to the West. During the oil embargo of 1973, the Arabs became an even more threatening enemy. Finally, the Gulf War of 1990 did much to perpetuate the Arab's role as the enemy.

The Arabs have done little to counter these images. They do not comprehend why the West doesn't understand them, but they do almost nothing to foster that understanding. As one Arab describes, "we have nobody to fault but ourselves for the way Arabs are perceived" (Lamb, 1987, p. 130). Lamb (1987) writes that Arabs as a whole are inept at articulating their causes and unskilled at using public relations to manipulate opinion. They criticize the Israelis for exerting great influence in the foreign press, but never make an effort at home or abroad to cultivate the foreign media or the public. The overwhelming negative images in the West and the Arab lack of media savvy, make the stereotypes difficult to overcome.

Arab Values, Beliefs, and Customs

Arab culture can be justifiably viewed as a nearly coherent whole. It is highly stable, and unlike many other traditional cultures, it has not been radically transformed by Western contact. Furthermore, strict adherence to the Koran and Islamic law present a formal structure within which Arab cultures exist (Weisfeld, 1990).

The Combination of Church and State

Islam is more than a religion; it is a way of life. There is no distinction between church and state. The two are so meshed together that it is impossible to talk about one concept in isolation of the other (Almaney & Alwan, 1982). Patai calls the Islamic religion "not one aspect of life, but the hub from which all else radiated" (1983, p. 144). Religion remains the central normative force of the culture and regulates everyday behavior, through

both positive and negative commandments (Patai, 1983). For example, Islamic values are a crucial aspect of the educational system, where textbooks must reflect the Islamic outlook. Science textbooks often use the word "Allah" instead of "nature" so it is clear that God is the source of natural growth and development (Nydell, 1987).

Favoritism of Sons

The Arab society is a patriarchal one. It is not the nuclear family, but the patrilineal family that provides the cultural framework for internalizing the Islamic norms and controlling the family destiny (Haj, 1992). Traditionally, two goats are sacrificed at the birth of a boy, one for a girl. Boys are indulged and allowed to order their sisters about. In one study, 10 of 11 Arab girls contacted said their brothers received more affection from their parents (Weisfeld, 1990). Males are encouraged in their educational pursuits, while females are often encouraged to drop out of school and get married. Arab parents tend to invest in a son in the hope that he will advance himself economically, reproduce successfully, uphold the family honor, and support needy kin, including themselves (Weisfeld, 1990).

The Role of Women

The maintenance of family honor is one of the highest values in Arab society. Misbehavior by women can do more damage to family honor than misbehavior by men, and clearly defined patterns of behavior have been developed to regulate the interactions of women (Nydell, 1987). According to the holy book of Islam, women are the private property of men, and a woman is completely under her husband's authority. He defines her status and roles, and can punish her physically for disobedience (Friedman & Pines, 1992).

Women are taught early that their sexuality does not belong to them; it is not their to

give or to withhold. It is the "inalienable, permanent property of the clan" (Haj, 1992, p. 764). As a result, sexual purity and lineage honor are seen as inseparable. To maintain sexual purity, the practice of veiling was instituted to prevent the amorous arousal of men. Early betrothal is also used to ensure chastity at the time of the wedding. Arab girls are sometimes betrothed at age 8 or 9 (Weisfeld, 1990). Finally, virginity tests and genital mutilation are frequently employed to guarantee the bride's chastity. Traditionally, a bride who failed her virginity test was killed (Weisfeld, 1990).

The overwhelming desire of all parents is to have sons, and it is a humiliation upon the family to have daughters. Fathers who have only female children are derided by society, and family honor can be lost if no male children are born (Patai, 1983). Because women were often seen as a societal and economic liability, the practice of female infanticide was instituted. Still practiced among some of the poorer and rural Arabs, female daughters are slain because they will cost money in a dowry and will not be able to provide for their parents in the future. Female infanticide may also be practiced as a safeguard against future misbehavior (Weisfeld, 1990).

The Islamic culture has strong taboos on menstruating women, who are defined as ritually impure. The menstruating woman must refrain from all contact with her husband. For example, she cannot hand him his hat. She must set it on the table for him to pick up. This restriction lasts the duration of menstruation and seven days after its cessation. Therefore, Arab women live in a state of ritual uncleanliness for half of their adult lives (Datan, 1992).

The value of a son is also expressed in the treatment of wives. A young bride enters

her husband's household at an extreme disadvantage as she will be subordinate not only to all men in the family, but also to senior women, especially the mother-in-law. She first begins to wield power only after giving birth to a son. If she bears only daughters, she will be treated throughout her life more or less as an unpaid servant (Patai, 1983).

Traditional Arab men and women do not view these social customs and restrictions on women as repressive, but complimentary to the status and nature of women. They see the restrictions as providing protection for women so that they need not be subjected to the stress, competition, temptations, and possible indignities of life in the "outside" world. Most Arab women feel satisfied that the present social system provides them with security, protection, and respect (Nydell, 1987).

Spouse Selection and Marital Relations

Most native Arabs, and many Arab-Americans, still prefer family-arranged marriages. Arabs feel that because marriage is such a major decision, it is considered prudent to leave it to the family's discretion rather than to choose someone solely on the basis of emotion or ideas of romance (Nydell, 1987).

Men of wealth tend to gain desirable women and are more likely to be polygynous, although the practice of polygamy is becoming increasingly rare. Arabs in their native countries negotiate a dowry. In the United States, where dowries are not legal, it is customary for the father of the bride to offer some incentive, such as a house, for someone to marry his daughter (Haj, 1992).

Youth in a bride is highly desirable. In traditional areas, the average age of a bride is 13, while in urban areas, the average age is 17. In the cases of child betrothal, the young

girl is sent to her future husband's family for safekeeping until she reaches approximately 13 years of age, when she is married. This virtually ensures her chastity. Until her marriage, the child typically acts as a servant for her future mother-in-law (Weisfeld, 1990).

Once married, the Arab man is recognized as the head of his immediate family, and his role and influence are overt (Nydell, 1987). The couple tends to live in two distinct worlds, each spending extensive amounts of time with same-sex kin. The husband traditionally is a distant figure. One recent study found that Arabs wives usually feel more comfortable with their mothers-in-law than with their husbands (Weisfeld, 1990).

Divorce is permitted in the Arab world, and is common enough that it does not carry a social stigma for the individuals involved (Nydell, 1987). The husband can divorce his wife simply by proclaiming it in front of witnesses. The wife has a more difficult time initiating divorce proceedings, and in many Arab countries, she has no legal means of obtaining a divorce unless her husband will agree to let her buy her way out (Weisfeld, 1990). In the United States, an Arab woman can obtain a divorce either through the courts or from a community religious leader. After a period of three to four months, which is necessary to determine if she is pregnant, the woman is free to remarry.

Implications for Counselors

Counselors working with Arab Americans benefit from an awareness of these cultural beliefs. For example, a competent counselor could never ignore the influence of the Islamic religion in the life of an Arab. Furthermore, Western counselors must certainly be aware of the influence of family and the roles men and women are expected to play in society. Encouraging a female Arab to engage in feminist activities would be tantamount to

ostracizing her from her community.

Aside from the values mentioned above, counselors also benefit from an awareness of certain cultural differences that may stand in the way of open communication. When Arabs engage in a conversation, they typically stand much closer together than individuals from the West. Arabs also tend to engage in fixed eye contact during a conversation (Almaney & Alwan, 1982). Counselors may experience this as a power struggle when in fact, it is cultural. Same sex Arabs tend to touch each other, or hold hands, when conversing. Excessive gesturing, and what Westerners would consider exaggeration is also part of the Arab style (Almaney & Alwan, 1982). Again, a counselor unaware of Arab ways may be confused by the proper interpretation of this behavior.

Among Arabs, time is not as fixed and rigidly segmented as it tends to be among Westerners. Social engagements and even appointments have no fixed beginnings or endings (Nydell, 1987). An Arab who is consistently late for an appointment could be misdiagnosed as resistant, rather than culturally appropriate.

American counselors will undoubtedly face resistance with an opposite-sex Arab. Arabs, even Arab Americans, have been socialized to confide in only same-sex confidants. Furthermore, it is unlikely, given the extreme social mores against such a liaison, that they will be comfortable in an unchaperoned meeting involving the two sexes. Culturally aware counselors will offer an Arab client the opportunity to meet with a same sex counselor.

Perhaps the major obstacle standing in the way of counseling the Arab is the deep-rooted cultural belief in Divine Will. Traditionally, Arabs have believed that people are helpless to control events. This is based on the religious belief that God has direct and

ultimate control of all things that happen. An Arab who is too self-confident about controlling his or her destiny is considered blasphemous (Nydell, 1987). Clearly, this belief stands firmly in the way of Western counseling.

Mental health counseling in Arab countries is erratic, and little research has been conducted on what services are available. Arabs seem to have a higher incidence of social anxieties than many other cultures. Research shows Arab women are more prone to pressures and report more symptoms of anxiety and depression (Ibrahim & Ibrahim, 1993).

Counseling is clearly not a well-accepted part of the Arab culture. While most Arab countries state that they offer some form of counseling to their citizens, closer inquiry reveals it is primarily in the form of academic advising for students (Soliman, 1987). Currently, the most common interventions in Arab countries are by psychiatrists who rely mostly on drugs; psychologists trained in any form of psychotherapy are rare (Ibrahim & Ibrahim, 1993).

Conclusion

Counselors working with Arab Americans are often treading in uncharted waters. The Arabs do not have a cultural history that encourages counseling. They have certain cultural behaviors and beliefs which could make Western style counselors label them as resistent. American counselors often do not have an understanding of Arab culture which goes beyond the stereotyping in the popular media. If counseling the Arab American is to be effective, Western style counselors will need to refocus their approach. It is not just the superficial which must change; anyone can learn to understand differences in proxemics or time. Understanding must occur at a deeper level, which encompasses the influence of religion, the role of men and women, and the belief in fatalism. It is only then that Arab Americans can enter counseling confident that their fundamental beliefs will be theirs to keep.

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